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ABSTRACT

A study explored the use of seven political information channels available to eligible voters during the 1986 off-year elections. Specifically examined were (1) the degree to which various political information channels were used during this election, (2) which of these information channels respondents depended upon most for information about the candidates and their positions on issues, (3) the most important patterns of exposure to the various information channels among the electorate, and (4) how these political information groups differed in their levels of political efficacy and political activity. The seven information channels investigated were these: (1) television; (2) newspapers; (3) interpersonal communication; (4) direct contact; (5) campaign literature; (6) radio; and (7) visual material. Respondents, 1,917 eligible voters from six communities in the southeastern United States, were randomly selected and interviewed. The sample was 56% female, 81.2% white, and averaged 13.9 years of education. The medium household income was between $19,000 and $30,000. Results indicated that television had the highest level of exposure, image dependency, and issue dependency. Newspapers were third in level of exposure, but second in both image and issue dependency. Although interpersonal communication ranked fifth in exposure, a significant minority of respondents were dependent on interpersonal communication for information about the candidates' stands on issues, and especially about candidate image. Although visual media ranked second in exposure, few respondents were dependent on it for image or issue information. Findings suggest that interpersonal communication seems to be a key communication channel for the politically active, and that a substantial minority of voters rely on information channels other than television and newspapers. (Tables of data, notes and references are attached.) (NKA)

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VIEWERS, READERS, AND JAWBONERS: THE USE OF POLITICAL INFORMATION CHANNELS DURING OFF-YEAR ELECTIONS IN THE SOUTHEAST

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VIEWERS, READERS, AND JAWBONERS: THE USE OF POLITICAL INFORMATION CHANNELS DURING OFF-YEAR ELECTIONS IN THE SOUTHEAST

Introduction

Basic models of communication focus attention on at least four components of the communication process: the source, the message, the channel, and the receiver (Becker, 1983). Political scientist, Harold Lasswell, immortalized each of these components in a sequence of questions that directed much of the research in mass communication for much of its history. Lasswell (1960: 117) described an act of communication as the answers to the following questions: Who, says what, in which channel, to whom, with what effect? Although all components of this model have been studied, a particularly significant body of research has examined the effects of specific channels of information on the public.

In political communication, researchers have frequently examined differences in the receivers of political information that are related to channels that they use. Although interpersonal communication (Tan, 1980), and direct mail (Strand, et al., 1983) have received some attention, most of these studies have compared eligible voters who depended on either television or newspapers for most of their political information. This research has typically been conducted during presidential elections and most of the studies used samples drawn from one location.[1]

The results of several studies have shown that some channels of communication are more effective means of transferring

information than others. Miyo (1983) reported that newspaper dependent respondents retained more political information than television dependent respondents, regardless of education level. In Becker et al.'s study (1979), television dependency was negatively related to knowledge about local affairs, but newspaper dependency was positively related. Becker and Dunwoody (1982) found that both newspaper and radio news use was positively related to respondent knowledge about local political candidates. These differences in knowledge may be related to differences among newspaper and television dependents in their perceptions of the candidates. Wagner (1983) reported that television dependent respondents perceived fewer differences among candidates than did newspaper dependent respondents. Thus, eligible voters who rely on television seen to be both receiving and perceiving less information than those who rely on newspapers.

The channel used for political information also seems to be related to attitudes about the political process. Robinson (1975, 1976) has reported that the reliance on television for political information is related to distrust, and cynicism about politics, and to a conviction of its inefficacy. These relationships were found for respondents of varying education and income levels. O'Keefe and Mendelsohn (1978) supported these results for a national sample of nonvoters, as did Becker and Whitney (1980) at the local level. In addition, Tan (1981) reported that political efficacy was a significant predictor of public affairs media use for White respondents and Miller and

Reese (1982) found a negative relationship between television dependency and political efficacy. However, support for these findings has not been universal. For example, O'Keefe (1980: 127) found "no direct evidence that greater television reliance evokes political disaffection or malaise."

Although earlier research (Kraus and Davis: 180-189) did not show a consistent relationship between media use and political participation (activity), recent studies have revealed a more stable relationship between these variables. Roberts (1979) found that attention to newspaper stories early in the campaign resulted in greater levels of participation in other media events, including televised political debates. Tan (1981: 133) found that political participation was "the strongest predictor of media use for public affairs information." Miller and Reese (1982) reported that individuals who were reliant on television news were lower in political activity. Kebbel (1985) examined the relationship between political participation and the use of multiple sources of news (television newscasts and documentaries, newspapers, radio news, and news magazines). He reported that levels of participation beyond voting "is the major explanatory variable in the model of multiple news media use" (p. 565).

Although significant in size and substance, previous research on channels of political information has been limited in four respects. First, this research has focused on newspaper and television dependency at the expense of other channels of political information such as interpersonal communication, direct mail, radio, and visual materials (signs, billboards, bumper

stickers, etc.). Thus, our understanding of how these less studied channels of political information function is limited. Second, most previous studies have been conducted during high interest presidential elections. Off-year elections, which typically generate less interest, have received little attention. Third, most studies have used data gathered from one location, thus limiting the generalizability of their findings. Finally, few studies have examined political information use in the Southeast. Considering the importance of this region in future national elections,[2] such an oversight should be corrected.

This study addressed these limitations by exploring the use of seven channels of information about politics available to eligible voters during the 1986 off-year elections in several diverse locations within the Southeast. The study answered four questions:

1. To what degree are various channels of political information used during an off-year election?
2. Which of these channels of information are respondents most dependent upon for information about the image of the candidates and their positions on the issues of the campaign?
3. What are the most important patterns of exposure to the various channels of political information among the electorate?
4. How do these political information groups differ in their levels of political efficacy and political activity?

Method

Respondents

The respondents were 1917 eligible voters from six communities in the Southeastern United States: Memphis, Tennessee (N=336); Birmingham, Alabama (N=412); Little Rock, Arkansas (N=398); Hattiesburg, Mississippi (N=291); Lafayette, Louisiana (N=216); and Athens, Georgia (N=264). Respondents' households were randomly selected from residential listings in the most recent telephone directory in each community, using a procedure outlined by Frey (1983). To lower the refusal rate, an introductory letter was mailed to each household, before telephone contact, explaining the nature of the study. Four attempts were made to contact each randomly selected household before that household was dropped from the sample. Once the household was contacted, one eligible voter per household was randomly selected for interview, using procedures described by Backstrom and Hursh (1963: 50-53). The refusal rate for those households contacted was 24.5 percent. The sample was 56% female and 81.2% White, with an average age of 43.1 years and an average of 13.9 years of education. The medium household income was between $19,000 and $30,000.

Procedures

Trained graduate and undergraduate students at six Southeastern Universities conducted the interviews, which lasted an average of 12 minutes. Most interviews were conducted on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday nights between 6:30 and 9:30 PM. For the five locations with November 4 elections,

interviews were conducted during the weeks of October 12 and October 19, 1986. Interviews concerning the September 27, 1986 Louisiana senatorial election were conducted during the weeks of September 7 and 14, 1986.

Channels of Political Information

The questionnaire measured exposure to ten channels of political information: television newscasts; radio newscasts; newspaper articles; conversations with other people (interpersonal communication); television advertisements; radio advertisements; newspaper advertisements; campaign literature; visual media such as bumper stickers, billboards and yard signs; and contact by a representative of the candidate. For each channel, respondents indicated how often they had encountered information about the campaign from that channel, using a seven point scale that ranged from never (1) to very often (7).[3]

Image dependency was measured using one item that asked the respondents to indicate "which of these sources of campaign information is the most important to you in deciding what the candidates are like as people." The channels of campaign information were television, radio, newspapers, interpersonal communication, campaign literature, visual material, and contact by a representative of the candidate. Using the same list of information channels, the item measuring issue dependency asked the respondents to indicate "which of these sources of campaign information is the most important to you in deciding how the candidates stand on the issues." For both dependency items, the presentation order of the list of

information channels was systematically varied to eliminate any order bias.

Political Efficacy and Activity

The scale used to measure political efficacy was adapted from Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes (1960) and used by Tan (1981). Respondents gave a "yes" or "no" response to five questions:

1. Do you think public officials like (the appropriate title was inserted here)[4] care much about what people think?
2. Would you say that the way people vote is the main thing that decides how things are run in this country?
3. Some people say that voting is the only way that people like yourself can have a say about how government runs things. Do you agree that this is true?
4. Do you believe that people like you have a say about what the government does?
5. Do you sometimes get the feeling that politics and government are so complicated that you really can't understand what is going on?

For items one, two, and four, a "no" was scored as a zero and a "yes" was scored as a one. For items three and five, the scoring was reversed. The total political efficacy score for respondents was the sum of their responses to all five items.

The scale used to measure political activity was adapted from scales used by Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes (1960) and Tan (1981). Respondents gave a "yes" or "no" response to five questions:

1. In this campaign, have you attended political rallies, or meetings?

2. Have you done anything to actively support a candidate?

3. Have you talked to other people to show them why they should vote for your candidate?

4. Are you registered to vote in the coming election for (the appropriate office was inserted here)?

5. Are you planning to vote in the coming election for (the appropriate office was inserted here)?

For all items, a "no" was scored as a zero and a "yes" was scored as a one. The total political efficacy score for respondents was the sum of their responses to all five items.

Results

Levels of exposure to, and dependency on, seven channels of political information are presented in Table 1.[5]

-------Insert Table 1 about here-------

Television had the highest level of exposure, image dependency and issue dependency. Newspapers were third in level of exposure, but second in both image and issue dependency. Although interpersonal communication ranked fifth in exposure, a significant minority of respondents were dependent on interpersonal communication for information about the candidates' stands on the issues, and especially about what the candidates are like as people. Although visual media ranked second in exposure, few respondents were dependent on it for image (2.3%) or issue information (1.7%).

Since over 75% of the respondents were dependent on television, newspapers, or interpersonal communication for both image and issue information, these three channels of information were used to classify respondents for further analyses. Exposure to each channel of political information was classified as either high (above the mean level of exposure) or low (below the mean level of exposure). Based on his or her level of exposure to television, newspapers, and interpersonal communication, each respondent was assigned to one of eight political information groups:

1. Campaign Followers (20.7% of the sample) had above average exposure to all three channels of campaign information.
2. Interpersonal/Newspaper Dependents (11.9% of the sample) had above average exposure to interpersonal communication and newspapers, but below average exposure to television.
3. Interpersonal/Television Dependents (10.3% of the sample) had above average exposure to interpersonal communication and television, but below average exposure to newspapers.
4. Interpersonal Dependents (9.3% of the sample) had above average exposure to interpersonal communication, but below average exposure to newspapers and television.
5. Media Dependents (9.0% of the sample) had below average exposure to interpersonal communication, but above average exposure to newspapers and television.
6. Newspaper Dependents (9.3% of the sample) had above average exposure to newspapers, but below average exposure to both interpersonal communication and television.

7. Television Dependents (9.1% of the sample) had below average exposure to interpersonal communication and newspapers, but above average exposure to television.

8. Campaign Avoiders (20.4% of the sample) had below average exposure to all three channels of campaign information.

Using these eight types as the conditions of the independent variable--exposure to political information--two one-way analyses of variance were run with total political efficacy and total political activity as the dependent variables.

The one-way ANOVA between exposure to political information and total political efficacy is reported in Table 2.

-------Insert Table 2 about here-------

The ANOVA was statistically significant (F=4.38, $p < .001$). Because the n's for the eight groups were unequal, Scheffe procedure was used for the multiple comparisons between means. Only two comparisons were statistically significant ($p < .05$). Both Interpersonal/Newspaper Dependents and the Campaign Followers were significantly higher in political efficacy than Campaign Avoiders.

The one-way ANOVA between exposure to political information and total political activity is reported in Table 3.

-------Insert Table 3 about here-------

The ANOVA was statistically significant (F=49.99, $p < .001$). The Scheffe procedure for the multiple comparisons between means revealed 18 statistically significant ($p < .05$) comparisons. These comparisons are summarized as follows:

1. Campaign Followers were significantly higher in political activity than Television Dependents, Campaign Avoiders, Newspaper Dependents, Media Dependents, and Interpersonal/Television Dependents.

2. Both Interpersonal Dependents and Interpersonal/Newspaper Dependents were significantly higher in political activity than Television Dependents, Campaign Avoiders, Newspaper Dependents, and Media Dependents.

3. Both Interpersonal/Television Dependents and Media Dependents were significantly higher in political activity than Television Dependents and Campaign Avoiders.

4. Newspaper Dependents were significantly higher in political activity than Television Dependents.

Discussion

The results of this study place the political information contained in television and newspapers during an off-year election in the larger context of the political information environment. Although most respondents report a greater exposure to and dependency on television and newspapers than on other media, other channels of political information, especially interpersonal communication, are important for a substantial minority of eligible voters. Over 40% of the respondents indicated that they were most dependent on channels of information other than television and newspapers to find out what the candidates were like as people. Over 32% were dependent on these other channels for information on the candidates' position on the issues. Eligible voters are aware of their exposure to

these other channels of political information and many of them are dependent on them.

The political information groups isolated in this study tended to be of similar size and importance. Except for the two groups with the greatest (Campaign Followers) and the least (Campaign Avoiders) exposure to the three most important channels of political information, each political information group represented approximately 10 percent of the sample. The Campaign Followers and Campaign Avoiders groups were approximately twice that size.

The relationship between these eight political information groups and total political efficacy was statistically significant but the differences between individual groups was modest. Of the 28 comparisons of mean political efficacy made among the groups, only 2 were statistically significant. Both Campaign Followers and Interpersonal/Newspaper Dependents were significantly higher in political efficacy than Campaign Avoiders. It appears that eligible voters must have above average exposure to both interpersonal communication and newspapers if they are to have a greater faith in the political system than eligible voters who avoid the political campaign.

The difference among political information groups in political activity was much greater. Of the 28 comparisons of mean political activity made among the groups, 18 were statistically significant. Respondents with above average exposure to interpersonal communication about the campaign were especially high in political participation. Of the 16

comparisons between groups with above average interpersonal communication and groups with below average interpersonal communication, 14 were statistically significant. Interpersonal communication seems to be critical in distinguishing the politically active from the politically inactive. In addition, a few differences were found among the four groups with below average exposure to interpersonal communication. Media Dependents were higher in political activity than both Television Dependents and Campaign Avoiders. And Newspaper Dependents were higher in political activity than Television Dependents. Among these four groups, newspaper reading about the campaign seems to be related to higher levels of political activity.

Previous channel research in political communication has focused upon differences related to the use of newspapers and television during presidential elections. The results of this study show that during six off-year elections in the Southeast, interpersonal communication seems to be a key channel of communication for the politically active. In addition, a substantial minority (about 40%) of eligible voters is relying on channels of information other than television and newspapers for its information about the candidates and their positions on the issues of the campaign. Future research should continue to examine these less frequently studied channels of political information.

Notes

1. A comprehensive review of this literature will not be attempted here. However, the studies cited in this paper are representative of the research in this area.

2. One reason for the increased political interest in the Southeast is its 1988 regional, presidential primary.

3. The form of these ten questions can be illustrated by the item measuring exposure to campaign information in television newscasts. It read "on a scale of 1 to 7, how often would you say you've seen stories about the campaign on television newscasts?"

4. The survey questions were adjusted to reflect a major office contested during the off-year in each location. The Little Rock and Memphis elections were for state governor. The Athens, Birmingham, and Lafayette elections were for United States Senator. The Hattiesburg election was for United States Representative.

5. Although initially, separate items were used to measure exposure to news and advertising in television, newspapers, and radio, these items were combined into a single exposure score for each of these media. Thus, exposure to political information on television during the campaign was defined as the average of a respondent's exposure to television news and television advertising during the campaign. The same procedure was used for radio and newspaper exposure.

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Table 1

CHANNELS OF POLITICAL INFORMATION BY RANK

		DEPENDENCIES**	
	Exposure*	Image	Issue
Television	1 (4.88)	1 (38.9%)	1 (40.3%)
Newspapers	3 (3.73)	2 (19.0%)	2 (25.2%)
Interpersonal Communication	5 (3.14)	3 (17.1%)	3 (10.4%)
Direct Contact	7 (1.64)	4 (11.3%)	5 (7.3%)
Campaign Literature	6 (2.45)	5 (5.5%)	4 (9.0%)
Radio	4 (3.16)	6 (4.1%)	6 (3.8%)
Visual Material	2 (4.41)	7 (2.3%)	7 (1.7%)

* The mean levels of exposure, on a 1 to 7 scale, are in parentheses.
** The percentages of dependent respondents are in parentheses.

Table 2

ONE-WAY ANOVA POLITICAL INFORMATION GROUPS BY POLITICAL EFFICACY

SOURCE	D.F.	SUM OF SQUARES	MEAN SQUARES	F RATIO	F PROBABILITY
Between Groups	7	39.67	5.67	4.38	.0001
Within Groups	1818	2353.34	1.29		
Total	1825	2393.01			

SCHEFFE PROCEDURE MULTIPLE COMPARISONS BETWEEN MEANS

MEAN	GROUP	IC- N- TV+	IC- N- TV-	IC- N+ TV-	IC- N+ TV+	IC+ N- TV+	IC+ N- TV-	IC+ N+ TV+	IC+ N+ TV-
2.467	Television Dep.								
2.502	Campaign Avoiders								
2.603	Newspaper Dep.								
2.646	Media Dependents								
2.672	I.C./Television Dep.								
2.734	I.C. Dependent								
2.844	Campaign Followers		*						
2.877	I.C./Newspaper Dep.		*						

* Denotes Pairs of Groups Significantly Different at the .05 Level,
IC = Interpersonal Communication, N = Newspapers, TV = television,
+ = above average, - = below average

Table 3

ONE-WAY ANOVA POLITICAL INFORMATION GROUPS BY POLITICAL ACTIVITY

SOURCE	D.F.	SUM OF SQUARES	MEAN SQUARES	F RATIO	F PROBABILITY
Between Groups	7	414.34	59.19	49.99	0.0
Within Groups	1844	2183.03	1.18		
Total	1851	2597.37			

SCHEFFE PROCEDURE MULTIPLE COMPARISONS BETWEEN MEANS

MEAN	GROUP	IC- N- TV+	IC- N- TV-	IC- N+ TV-	IC- N+ TV+	IC+ N- TV+	IC+ N- TV-	IC+ N+ TV-	IC+ N+ TV+
1.669	Television Dep.								
1.749	Campaign Avoiders								
2.115	Newspaper Dependents	*							
2.151	Media Dependents	*	*						
2.492	I.C./Television Dep.	*	*						
2.663	I.C. Dependents	*	*	*	*				
2.792	I.C./Newspaper Dep.	*	*	*	*				
2.908	Campaign Followers	*	*	*	*	*			

* Denotes Pairs of Groups Significantly Different at the .05 Level,
IC = Interpersonal Communication, N = Newspapers, TV = television,
+ = above average, - = below average.